

New IT literacy test may benefit students, colleges**By Katherine Shek*****Community College Times*****November 23, 2004**

Community colleges will soon be able to measure not only their students' technology skills but their ability to use technology to effectively communicate to others.

The Educational Testing Service (ETS), which develops the SATs, has launched the new Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy Assessment, the first standardized information and communication assessment for postsecondary students.

According to ETS, ICT literacy measures students' ability to use "digital and communications tools as well as networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate and create information to function in a knowledge society."

The ICT assessment was developed by a panel of seven two- and four-year institutions, including California Community Colleges and Miami Dade College.

Terry Egan, ICT project manager at ETS, said information and communication technology skills are critical for students' academic and professional advancement.

"When students transfer from two-year to four-year universities, they must demonstrate the high-level research skills and ICT proficiency required by such institutions," Egan said.

In fact, eight colleges within the California Community College System already have a graduation requirement of information and technology competency, and some four-year universities, such as San Francisco State University, require transferred students to demonstrate such skills, said community college officials.

ETS' ICT literacy assessment is unique because it does not use multiple-choice questions, like most information technology assessments do, to gauge students' knowledge, officials said. Instead it requires test takers to use basic technology as a tool to arrive at solutions through 16 different tasks over a two-hour period. Students will take the test using a PC, pencil and paper in a proctored environment.

"The test demands that students use technology to perform information management tasks, such as extracting specific information from a database, developing a spreadsheet, or composing an e-mail summarizing research findings," said ETS officials.

The ICT test will be available for the first time from January to March. Officials expect that as many as 10,000 students will have taken the assessment by the end of the test administration period.

Bonnie Gratch, coordinator of library and instructional services for the City College of San Francisco, said technology and communication skills are increasingly important for two-year college students.

"We have so many vocational programs here, students go out to the workplace and they are expected to know how to use PowerPoint and how to find things [online]," said Gratch, who was involved in the planning of ICT.

Another reason why ICT competency is important is that regional accreditation agencies are increasingly focusing on student outcomes, Gratch said. "The trend is more and more community colleges are going to make [ICT skills] a higher priority on their campuses so students have these skills before they leave," she added.

The ICT test will first be used by colleges and universities as large scale assessments in 2005. Starting in 2006, it will offer individual score reporting with the ratings of different levels of proficiency, said Egan from ETS.

Community colleges have not decided how they will use the ICT assessment. They can offer the test for students to opt out of a requirement, use the assessment to compare students' ICT literacy skills across majors and to establish a baseline performance for students as well as to plan curriculums, Egan said.

Although ETS is not the only group developing technology and communications literacy testing, other similar testing appears to focus only on students' technology skills but not so much on how well they can use technology to communicate, community college officials said.

One example is an Ohio initiative dubbed Project Sails at Kent State University which involves multiple choice assessments. Another available measure is the International Computer Driving License, which assesses primarily test takers' technical skills, but not their competency to use technology as a tool to find solutions, said Topsy Smalley, instruction librarian at Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, Calif.

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